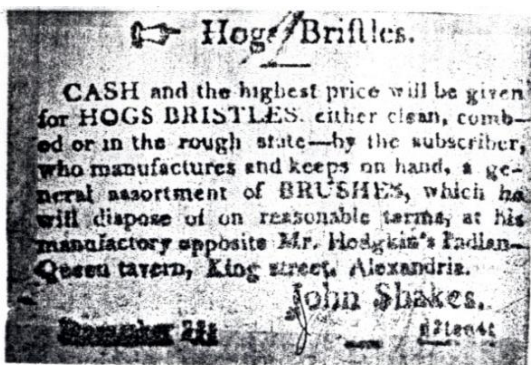




HEALTH & BEAUTY IN OLD ALEXANDRIA

FROM THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA ARCHAEOLOGY COLLECTIONS

HEALTH & BEAUTY IN OLD ALEXANDRIA



From left: call for hog bristles by brush maker (*Alexandria Gazette*, 1810); early 1900s photograph of Downham family, including famous Mai (Lee-Fendall House)

Artifact Group #1 Toothbrushes

Cow bone and hog hair (one with initials “CAB”); ivory

19th century

Excavated: 300 and 500 blocks King Street

Until the beginning of the 19th century, dentistry in the U.S. lagged behind Europe—to put it mildly. Barbers routinely performed extractions. Prior to the 18th century, quack “toothdrawers” pulled teeth in the street. In 1840, the scene of American dentistry changed when the first dental college opened in Baltimore. Dentistry in Alexandria firmly established itself shortly after. From the plethora of toothbrushes at sites of a wide socio-economic range, it appears that most people at the time were concerned about the health of their teeth. Handles were carved from the upper leg bones of cows. Hog bristles (see above) came from northern China and Russia, principally Siberia.

Group #2 Combs

Bone (top in box) and horn/ivory

19th century

Excavated: 400 and 500 blocks King Street

Standards of cleanliness were different in the 19th century than today. Many people washed their hair only twice a year even though they slept on mattresses stuffed with insect-ridden straw. Combing one’s hair was a necessity not an exercise in vanity. Double-edged lice combs often had fine teeth for removing insects and dirt and wide teeth to separate hair strands (bottom in box). While the most common comb materials by the mid-19th century were bone and vulcanized rubber, factories like Thomas Mount’s Fancy Hardware Store and Comb Manufactory in Alexandria also dealt in horn, ivory, and tortoise shell. Mount’s opened next to Gadsby’s Tavern in 1809. He moved to King Street in 1816 and operated through 1838. The box’s top comb was found in the vicinity of the Mount factory.

Group #3 Cold Cream Jar and “Peerless’ Color Restorer for the Hair” Bottle

Glass

Late 19th/Early 20th century

Excavated: Lee-Fendall House, 614 Oronoco Street

Cosmetic bottles and jars discovered in a Lee-Fendall House privy speak to the make-up of the home: wealthy women. Mary Elizabeth Lee Fleming, direct descendant of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, lived in the house in the 1870–1880s. Her three sisters lived there until 1905, followed by the Downham women (pictured above) until 1931. It appears most of the artifacts date to this last period, making it likely that some of these cosmetic containers belonged to the famous Mai Downham. Before her marriage, Mai toured America, singing in musicals and operettas. The *Gazette* said she had a “voice of rare quality.” She was a celebrity in her day.